The Denbrough Show by Bibabybi

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Summary:

“Your entire life is being fucking live streamed on Television, Bill!”

“I - what - no,” Bill shakes his head, as if that will somehow clear things up. “I would’ve noticed.”

The stranger shoots him a look that’s almost akin to pity. It makes Bill’s stomach crawl.

“I can prove it."

Bill Denbrough's life is far from perfect. But he has everything he could have ever wanted. Friends that love him, parents that smile just the right amount, a boyfriend that would do anything for him. Nothing special. And yet a stranger in a fucking fanny pack goes the extra mile and breaks into his home, just to tell him his far from perfect life is being viewed by a million different people. It's only fair

to say this raises a few questions. Who can he trust to have his back? Where is Beverly? And, perhaps most important of all, what really happened to Georgie?

Or: The Truman Show AU

1. Chapter One

Bill doesn't feel like he's being watched.

Sure, Derry's always been a little weird (not that he's ever had anything to compare it to) and he wouldn't say he feels particularly safe. But he's never felt the need to glance over his shoulder in the dead of night, searching for a pair of eyes he'll never see.

Or, perhaps, he's just grown accustomed to it. Maybe it's one of those things he's grown so used to that it doesn't even register anymore. Like Richie's shitty vision. To anyone else, opening their eyes to find themselves in a blurry world would set off every warning bell in their head. But to Richie, that's just how the world is. Blurry.

Maybe Bill's world is blurry too.

Maybe he always feels like he's being watched.

Nonetheless, it's still a shock to wander into his own bathroom at *3 in the fucking morning* only to find someone already there. And not one of his parents, which would have been bad enough. No, this is someone he's never seen before. Someone who's got him pinned against the wall, hand pressed over his mouth, and is barely over 5 feet tall.

"Thank God you were the first person to walk into the bathroom," the person says, as if he didn't accost Bill in his own goddamn home. "This would have been *so* awkward if your parents came in first."

'And this isn't?' Bill wants to ask, but the stranger's hand is still covering his mouth so he stays silent.

"I have to tell you something," the stranger whispers. "It's *important* . But you have to stay quiet, okay?"

Bill nods, because what else is he supposed to do?

Slowly, the stranger peels his fingers away.

He looks apprehensive, and rightfully so, because not a moment later

Bill's opening his mouth to let out a shriek he's sure would have woken all of Derry. But the stranger seems to sense this and all Bill gets out is a choked gasp as the stranger shoves his hand against his lips once more.

" *Quiet* ," the stranger hisses. "I swear to fucking God. Richie didn't tell me you were impossible to work with."

"Ruh-Richie?" Bill says, the words muffled and garbled against the stranger's skin.

The stranger nods, more serious than any conversation pertaining Richie deserves.

"I know Richie," he says. "And Stan, and Mike, and Ben." He hesitates for a moment, voice somehow going even softer. "And Bev."

Bill shoves his shoulders harshly and the stranger stumbles backwards. Bill is twistedly pleased with the way he nearly topples into the bathtub.

" *Bev* ?" Bill says, keeping his voice low. But *only* because he wants to know what this guy has to say. "How do yuh-you know Bev?"

The stranger nods. "We're friends. We're all-"

"Do you know wh-where she is?"

Another nod.

"Where?"

"I can't-"

Bill lurches forward, grasping the collar of the stranger's shirt between his fingers. "You can. Where the f-f-fuck is she?" The stranger struggles, but Bill only pulls him closer. "Are yuh-yuh-you trying to tuh-tell me you snuck into my fucking house to tell me you *nuh-know* where Bev is but can't actually fuh-fucking tell me where?"

"That's not why I came here!" the stranger yelps. His voice sounds strangled and scratchy, like he's warding off an incoming wave of

panic. “I came here to tell you - I need to tell you -” he lets out a wheezing breath. “Can you put me down?”

“You *buh-buh-broke* into my *house* !” Bill hisses, jostling the stranger the littlest bit.

“Okay, okay!” The stranger shuffles, trying to find his footing. “I just - I have to tell you - *fuck* -” he scrambles for a fanny pack secured around his waist - a fucking fanny pack - and, in a flash, Bill’s grabbing his wrist in a death like grip.

They struggle for a moment, and it’s only when the stranger’s wheezing becomes insufferably loud that Bill actually looks down. There’s no weapon, like he suspected. Instead, he’s gripping an inhaler between shaky fingers.

Bill drops his wrist, watching as the stranger shovels the inhaler between his lips and takes one large hit. Bill keeps a hand on his collar, but is sure to loosen his grip. He’s sure the stranger isn’t going to hurt him now, but that doesn’t mean he’s any less dangerous.

“I have to tell you,” the stranger continues, “none of this is real.”

Bill furrows his eyebrows. “Wh-Wh-What?”

“ *This* ,” the stranger gestures vaguely. “None of this.”

“My buh-buh-bathroom?”

“Yes! Well, no. Sort of!”

“It looks pretty real to me.”

“Your bathroom is real,” the stranger says. “I mean, at least physically. It’s not like this is all a figment of your imagination. That would be ridiculous. It’s just-” the stranger hesitates, lower lip wormed between his teeth. “Everything that happens is planned. Every little moment in your life. Your career, who you hang out with, who you - who you date. It’s all just people pulling the string so the rest of the world can watch your entire world play out on their fucking flatscreen TV’s.”

Bill feels the material of the strangers shirt slip from between his fingers. “ *What* ?”

The stranger stumbles away from him, hurriedly straightening his shirt. “Your entire life is being fucking live streamed on Televison, Bill!”

“I - what - no,” Bill shakes his head, as if that will somehow clear things up. “I would’ve noticed.”

The stranger shoots him a look that’s almost akin to pity. It makes Bill’s stomach crawl.

“I can prove it,” the stranger insists. “I know what they’re planning for this week.”

Bill folds his arms over his chest, doing his best to act like his life isn’t shattering around him. He nods, silently pushing the stranger to continue.

“Tomorrow Henry and his friends are gonna be looking for you,” the stranger says. He bounces on the balls of his feet and twists his fingers together in a manner that looks almost painful. As if he has any right to be nervous. “When they find you-”

“If,” Bill interjects.

The stranger fixes him with a hard stare. “ *When* they find you, they’ll tell you it’s because you didn’t let Victor copy off your english test last week. Richie will find you afterwards. He’ll take you home, patch you up. He’ll be an A plus boyfriend.” The stranger spits the word *boyfriend* , as if it burns his tongue on the way out. “Tuesday Mike will invite you up to the farm. He feels bad about Monday-”

“Does he?” It’s not that Bill believes any of this. It’s not that Bill thinks any of it is real. He’s just curious. If, hypothetically, this were all real (which it’s not, of course it’s not), would his friends care?

“Yes. Once you’re on the farm, Mike will give you some great advice about fighting back or maybe it’s not fighting back, I dunno-”

“Those are the only tuh-two options!”

“Well I wasn’t really listening, okay? Anyway, Wednesday you’ll realize Richie isn’t in school. Ben will tell you it’s because he got in a fight with Henry. When you see him he’ll be covered in bruises,” The stranger gnaws nervously on his lower lip, “It probably won’t be makeup. Thursday Stan will take you birdwatching. He’ll tell you it’s because everything’s been so hectic recently, you deserve some quiet. You’ll see - fuck, what is it - you’ll see some rare bird. Some bird that’s not usually here. Stan will be ecstatic. Friday-” the stranger clears his throat awkwardly, a pink tint flooding his cheeks. “Friday Richie will try to convince you to sleep with him-”

“ *What* ?” Bill squeaks, and he’s sure his cheeks are just as red as the stranger’s. “I - I can’t - I don’t - Wuh-Wait, Friday? Friday’s the - th-th-that’s the - the fuh-fuh-fucking anniversarry - Juh-Georgie-”

“I know,” the stranger murmurs. “We know. Richie knows.”

“ *Then why* -”

“Director’s orders,” the stranger shrugs. “Can’t say no. Can’t risk getting kicked off the show.”

Bill hugs his arms tightly around himself. “I’m not gonna do it.”

“That’s fine by me.” The stranger glances towards the bathroom window. “I should get going.”

“Alright.”

“Don’t tell the others about this,” the stranger says. “At least not in the open. No one can know you know. Um - if you need time away from the cameras, the bathrooms are the only places without them.”

Bill nods, as if that makes sense.

“Alright,” murmurs the stranger. “Good luck, Bill.”

It’s only once he’s already clambered out the window that Bill realizes he forgot to find out where Beverly is.

-

By the time Bill wakes up the next morning, he's convinced himself last night was just some terrible hallucination. Just a nightmare. Nothing to worry about.

He changes in the bathroom anyway.

At school, he does everything in his power to avoid Henry and his goons. He checks around every corner, he begs his friends to keep an eye out for them, he keeps Richie by his side as often as possible.

It's still not enough.

Just when he's starting to think he's gotten off scot-free, the school building disappearing behind him, a figure steps directly into his pathway.

Bill steels his gaze. "Henry."

"Hey there, Billy," Henry sneers. "Going somewhere?"

"Home," Bill says shortly.

"So soon? We haven't even had a chance to say hello."

Bill moves to duck around Henry, but the older boy is faster. He fastens his hand around Bill's wrist in a vice-like grip and tugs hard enough to send Bill toppling to the ground. He lands with an involuntary *oof* slipping past his lips, his head bouncing against the pavement.

He hisses softly as he pushes himself up onto his elbows.

"You're a fucking brat, Denbrough," Henry snarls.

Someone hauls him to his feet and Bill stumbles in an attempt to secure his footing. Not that it matters much, the hand clutching the back of his T-Shirt is holding him up just fine on its own.

"Guh-Get off me!" Bill spits. He twists and turns in his attacker's hold, but it only makes the hand grip him tighter.

Patrick laughs, cold and hard, from behind him. "He thinks he has a

say in what's about to happen. That's cute."

Bill expects some snarky, half-baked response. He expects to have some time before Henry starts hitting him, maybe even enough time to escape.

But Henry responds to Patrick's statement with a white-knuckled fist that sends Bill's head rocketing backwards into Patrick's chest.

"You think you're above everyone, don't you?" Henry snarls.

Bill just grunts in response. Waves of pain vibrate down to his skull.

"Think you're better than everyone? Mister Perfect?"

"I nuh-nuh-never said that."

Henry responds with a quick hit to Bill's gut that has him doubled over in a second.

" *Fuck you* !"

"A-Alright, alright," Bill wheezes, putting his hands up in surrender. "I'm suh-sorry!"

Patrick drops him and he lands on his hands and knees in a way that he's sure will leave bruises.

"Is this-" he stops to take a gasping breath. "Is this be-because of the tuh-test?" He chances a glance up at Henry. He regrets it as soon as they lock eyes, Henry's full of murder and hatred, but Bill refuses to back down.

"He got a fucking 38 percent!" Henry hisses. "He's fucking furious, you're lucky he's not here himself!"

"Well it's nice to see you cuh-care so muh-muh-much-"

Bill yelps as Henry's boot connects with his shoulder. He collapses face first onto the pavement, pin-pricks of blood scattering his face as the skin tears.

He can hear Henry and Patrick walking away, their laughter loud and boisterous. But he doesn't feel any sense of relief.

All he can think is, *fuck* .

2. Chapter Two

Summary for the Chapter:

> Richie squeezes his knee gently. “Are you sure you’re alright? You’re acting really weird.”
>
> “Mhm,” Bill nods. “Just puh-puh-peachy.”
>
> Maybe he wants Richie to keep pushing. Maybe he wants him to push until Bill snaps and screams that he knows. He knows he isn’t real, he knows none of this is real.
>
> But Richie just smiles and continues to wipe the blood from his face.

Sure enough, Richie finds him barely a minute later.

Bill’s just starting the struggle of sitting up when a warm hand comes to rest against his shoulder. The one that’s not throbbing in a way that tells Bill it’s going to be bruised tomorrow - might even be bruised right now.

“Holy shit, what happened to you?” Richie says. He drops to his knees and takes Bill’s chin in one of his hands, turning his face so he’s forced to look at him. “Your nose looks busted.”

“I’m fuh-fine,” Bill says. Except he’s not. Because he kind of wants to throw up right now, and it has nothing to do with the beating he just received.

“This does *not* look fine,” Richie says. “C’mon, let me take you home.”

“Don’t wanna go home,” Bill says before he can stop himself. If there really is a TV crew hidden in the bushes, he’s going to screw with their plans as much as he can.

Richie furrows his eyebrows. “Where else am I supposed to clean you up?”

“I can do it muh-myself,” Bill says, voice cold. He tries not to feel guilty about the shock that flashes in Richie’s eyes.

“Of course you can,” murmurs Richie. “But you don’t have to.”

And he looks so sincere that for a moment Bill almost believes him.

“I want to,” Bill says. He hopes he sounds confident, because he sure as hell doesn’t feel it.

“Alright,” Richie grumbles. “What’s got your panties in a bunch?”

“Fuck off, Ruh-Ruh-Rich.”

Bill pushes himself to his feet. He has to grit his teeth through the pain, but he does it. He’s able to stand all on his own.

Walking is a different story. He takes one step and suddenly the pavement is flying up to meet him.

Richie catches him last minute, arms wrapped tight around his waist and breath hot against his ear.

“C’mon, let me help.”

Bill considers this, though he refuses to maintain eye contact. Allowing Richie to go with him means playing directly into their hands. But, really, he doesn’t know how he would fix himself on his own. He’s starting to feel nauseous. Besides, Richie looks genuine.

Bill breathes out sharply through his nose and gives the tiniest nod.

He’s barely finished before Richie’s wrapping an arm securely around his waist and directing him down the road.

When they get to his home, Richie pulls him into the kitchen. Bill jumps onto the counter without a second thought, watching warily as Richie darts back and forth from there to the bathroom, dumping everything he needs next to Bill’s legs.

“Wuh-Wuh-Wouldn’t it be easier to just go to the buh-bathroom?” Bill asks.

He searches Richie's face for any sort of giveaway. But he just grins lazily.

"There's more space out here," he says.

"There's puh-plenty of space in the bathroom," Bill pushes.

"The bathroom is very sexy-"

"It is *nuh-not* !"

"That's not what your mom said last night."

"God, Richie, *shut up* ."

" *Oh, Richard* ," Richie says in a high-pitched voice that Bill guesses is some terrible impression of his beloved mother. " *Won't you meet me in the bathroom? I have a shower to take and I would ever so like your help washing my ass.* "

"Beep, beep," Bill says with a roll of the eyes. It's all so normal that for a second he forgets all about the stranger and his foretellings of the future.

But then Richie's dabbing at the scratches on his chin and Bill's snapped back into his horrifying reality.

"How'd you piss them off this time?" Richie asks.

"Guess," Bill says. Because he's an asshole.

Richie shrugs. "They're assholes?"

Bill rolls his eyes and says, "I wuh-wouldn't let Victor copy off my eh-eh-english test," like it's obvious.

Richie doesn't take the bait. "That's such bullshit."

"I know," grumbles Bill. "Who would think that's a reasonable response?"

"An idiot," Richie says. For just a second his eyes flit over Bill's shoulder, staring at the wall behind him like it just called him every

foul name under the sun. But his eyes are back on Bill so quickly that even with his current paranoia Bill's almost positive he imagined it. "You don't deserve that."

Bill likes to think there's more behind his words. He likes to believe the man staring back at him is more than just an actor. He likes to believe he's real.

But the truth is Bill has no idea. He has no idea about anything anymore.

He mumbles out a, "Thanks," anyway.

Richie squeezes his knee gently. "Are you sure you're alright? You're acting really weird."

"Mhm," Bill nods. "Just puh-puh-peachy."

Maybe he wants Richie to keep pushing. Maybe he wants him to push until Bill snaps and screams that *he knows. He knows he isn't real, he knows none of this is real.*

But Richie just smiles and continues to wipe the blood from his face.

-

Tuesday rolls around and Mike invites Bill up to the farm.

Bill goes without much resistance because, even if this is all fake, Mike's always had a sort of calming effect and *fuck* if Bill doesn't need that right now.

He sits folded up inside a wheelbarrow, watching as Mike bounces around the barn. For awhile they're silent. It's not awkward, it's never awkward, but it is heavy. Bill feels like he's being smothered in the world's largest blanket.

Finally, Mike says, "Richie told me about yesterday."

"Hmm?" Bill says, too startled to think of a reasonable response.

"Yesterday," Mike repeats. "With Bowers."

“Oh,” murmurs Bill. “Right. It wasn’t that buh-bad. Not as bad as it could’ve been, anyway.”

“I know,” sighs Mike. “I just feel-”

“Bad?”

Mike cracks a smile, and it almost makes Bill forget he’s angry at him. “Yeah. I just - I should’ve been there.”

“I can take care of muh-myself.”

“I know. But you don’t have to.”

His smile is so blinding that Bill almost believes him. But then a spurt of pain flies up his nose and he remembers why he’s here. So thousands of people can watch him - what - feel sorry for himself?

“Th-Th-Thanks,” he says, though he refuses to meet Mike’s eyes.

“Are you okay?” Mike asks. “I know what happened was shitty-”

“I’m fuh-fine.”

Mike pauses, clearly taken aback by Bill’s short tone.

“Okay,” he says, voice soft. “But you know it’s okay if you’re not, right?”

Bill just nods, because there isn’t a doubt in his mind that if he tried to form even the simplest of words, he would break.

It’s not like he *wants* to cry over these idiots. They lied to him. He doesn’t even know if they’re using their real names.

But he can’t stop the prickle of heat that’s slowly rising against the back of his eyes.

They’re supposed to be his *friends* .

“Hey,” murmurs Mike, because apparently Bill isn’t as good at hiding his emotions as he thought. He gently swipes his thumbs under Bill’s eyes, catching the stray tears Bill hadn’t even realized escaped.

“You’re the strongest guy I know. Don’t let a few douchebags let you forget that.”

Bill lets out a shaky breath. “Do you ruh-really mean that?”

‘ *Do you mean it?’* He silently asks. ‘ *Do you mean any of it?’*

“Of course,” Mike says, nodding firmly.

“I duh-duh-didn’t do anything,” Bill grumbles. “They’re ruining my luh-life and I juh-juh-juh - *fuck*- I let them!”

He eyes Mike’s reaction carefully.

‘Please, please understand what I’m saying . Please help me.’

“You don’t have to fight back, Bill. No one’s going to think any less of you,” Mike says and Bill’s heart sinks. Either he doesn’t understand or he really is just an actor with a script. “But you shouldn’t be afraid to fight back. I don’t doubt you would give them a run for their money.”

Bill chuckles mirthlessly.

“Th-Thanks,” he mumbles.

“Sitting back makes for an easier life. A simpler life,” Mike continues. “There’s nothing wrong with that. But some things are worth fighting for.”

Bill nods. He opens his mouth to respond, ready to shut the conversation down before it can get any more pathetic, but the words are stolen from him as Mike pulls him into a bone-crushing hug.

“No matter who the enemy is,” Mike whispers, breath tickling Bill’s ear.

It’s quiet enough that anyone else nearby wouldn’t have picked up on it. It’s meant for Bill, and Bill only.

But there isn’t a soul in sight. There’s no reason for Mike to worry about someone else overhearing.

Unless...

Bill's heart speeds up, pounding furiously against his ribcage.

"Thank you," he whispers. And for the first time all day, he means it.

-

On Wednesday Bill marches up to his lunch table and says, "Did Richie try to fight Bowers?" with such authority that he even catches the attention of the surrounding tables. He's horrifically pleased to see the panic stricken look that crosses Ben's face.

"How did you know?" Ben asks, voice quiet and cheeks tinged pink. He glances around the cafeteria and Bill suddenly feels guilty about drawing so much attention to them. He knows it makes Ben nervous.

' *But does it?'* A voice in the back of his head asks. ' *He is on live TV everyday.'*

Bill forces that thought away as he lowers himself into the seat across from Ben.

"Luh-Luh-Lucky guess," he shrugs. "I just fuh-figured that would be th-th-the most logical ruh-reason. He seemed pretty upset the other duh-day."

Ben nods, seemingly pleased with this answer. "He's just protective, you know how he is."

"What's this about?" asks a voice and Bill glances over just as Mike slides into the seat next to Ben.

"Richie," Ben answers simply.

Stan, who has claimed the seat next to Bill, scoffs. "Richie's not protective, he's just an idiot."

"He could be both," Mike argues.

"Wh-Whatever the reason," Bill says. "He's stuh-stuh-stupid."

“He’s not stupid!” Ben insists. “He just loves you.”

‘ *Does he?’*

“Wouldn’t you do the same for him?” Ben continues.

“Right,” mumbles Bill. “Of course.”

The worst part is, he probably would.

“We should go see him after school,” Mike says. “I’m sure he would appreciate it.”

“I wuh-wuh-would’ve appreciated him not s-s-st-sticking his nose where it doesn’t buh-belong,” huffs Bill.

Ben sighs heavily. “Bill-”

“ *I know* !” Bill snaps. “I know. He juh-just wanted to puh-pruh-protect me. I just-”

He stops himself, gnawing slowly on his lower lip. He just what? Why is he so mad at Richie? He’s angry at all of the losers, sure, but something about Richie is really fueling the fire.

Maybe it’s the way he so effortlessly dodges all of Bill’s hints.

Maybe it’s the fact that all of Richie’s “protective” acts are nothing more than a director’s choice.

Maybe it’s the fact that Richie’s willing to take Bill’s virginity on the anniversary of his brother’s death.

Maybe it’s the way Richie lies ever-so-easily through his teeth, telling him he loves him.

Maybe it’s all of it.

But how is he supposed to say that? So he just sighs and says, “Suh-Suh-Sorry. I’m just st-stressed.”

Stan smiles softly and reaches out to squeeze Bill’s shoulder. Just for a moment, Bill feels like he’s on fire.

“It’s alright,” Stan murmurs. “We get it.”

“Thanks,” Bill mumbles, his gaze dropping down to his shoes.

“Bill, are you-”

“*I’m fuh-fucking fine, Ben*!”

Ben looks taken aback by the sudden outburst, which Bill can’t say he blames him for. Despite how much Bill wants to hate him, he still feels an enormous amount of shame at the widening of Ben’s eyes. It’s hard not to. He looks like he just watched Bill kick a kitten.

“Sorry,” mutters Bill. “I’m fine.”

If only that were true.

Notes for the Chapter:

This story is ending up being more of a slow burn than I originally planned but that's alright, that's alright. I hope you're all enjoying the chapters so far (and tell me in the comments if they're too short, I can try to make them a little longer), please comment and all that good stuff! I know the dates and ages of when this takes place is a little fuzzy right now and I'm sorry I didn't explain it in the first chapter, but do not fear. All will make sense soon.

Chapter three should be up soon!

Tumblr:
Fanfic/IT: @s-oulpunk
Main: @im-a-rocketman

3. Chapter Three

Summary for the Chapter:

> Richie's laying across Bill's entire bed, glasses askew and hair mused. All in all, not very threatening. But Bill still feels his heart drop to the bottom of his feet.
>
> "How are you feeling?" Richie asks.
>
> Bill shrugs noncommittally.
>
> Richie frowns and reaches out for him. "C'mere." Bill must hesitate for too long because a moment later Richie's chuckling and saying, "I won't bite. C'mon."

Richie looks even worse than Bill had suspected.

His face is littered with bruises, complete with a black eye and busted lip. A part of Bill is almost pleased with the display. Serves him right. But a bigger part of him can't help the desperate need to lurch forward and wrap Richie in the biggest hug he can muster.

He withholds this urge with all of his might.

"Jesus, Rich," Stan says, his voice sounding strained. "Your fucking face."

"I know, my fucking face," Richie whines. "Now what face am I gonna fuck with?"

Stan rolls his eyes. "I can't even be worried about you without - Whatever. Move over."

He shoves Richie aside without so much of a second thought and the rest of his friends follow suit. Bill can feel Richie's eyes following him but he keeps his gaze securely on the ground. He just has to get through this. Once he gets through this he can go home and hide alone in his bedroom for as long as he likes.

There's an awkward pause where Bill suspects his friends are waiting

for him to speak. But he doesn't offer anything other than a quiet huff of air, and instead Ben's the one to break first.

"Richie," he says, " *Why* ? You know better."

Richie shrugs and Bill doesn't miss the way he winces at the movement. "They deserved it."

"Looks like you taught them one hell of a lesson," Stan deadpans.

"Shut up."

"It does look really bad, Rich," Mike says. "Is there anything we can do to help?"

" *Awe* , thank you, Nurse Mikey," Richie smirks. "How very kind of you." When Mike just rolls his eyes, Richie continues, "And I'm fine, really. My face has been like this for hours."

Mike grimaces. "That doesn't make me feel any better."

"Have you at least put ice on it?" Stan asks.

Richie pulls a face. "Why would I need to put ice-"

"You're so fucking stupid." Stan doesn't let him finish before he's spinning him around and shoving him in the direction of the kitchen.

"So what happened?" Ben asks. "You just saw Bowers and jumped him?"

"Something like that," says Richie, who's now tenderly pressing an ice pack to his cheek. "I saw them laughing and something inside me just snapped. I was just so angry. Like they thought it was fucking funny."

It happens so fast that Bill almost doesn't catch it, but Stan and Mike share a *look* .

Not the usual Richie look. Mike's not rolling his eyes, and Stan's not giving him that usual dead-eyed look he has when Richie says something stupid. No. They look almost *alarmed* . Like Richie fucked

up. Genuinely fucked up.

Bill feels his heart speed up and he takes the tiniest step forward. Currently he has no way of knowing what that look means, but *hell* if he isn't going to find out.

"They could've been laughing about anything, Richie," Stan says. "It's been two days already."

Richie falters, as if he hadn't realized what he had said until just then. "Right. I guess you're right. I didn't - I wasn't - I just wasn't thinking."

"You're never thinking," murmurs Stan, though there's no real bite behind the words.

Ben clears his throat awkwardly. "Anyone up for a movie?"

Stan and Mike nod hurriedly and in a flash they're gone. Bill can't help the way his stomach drops as he listens to them stumble across the house. They've clearly already figured it out, and Bill still understands *nothing* .

Bill doesn't realize how long he's been standing there until Richie says, "You alright there? You look like you're gonna be sick." He jerks his head towards the sink. "Do it over there if you are."

Bill shakes his head and steps closer to Richie, crowding him against the kitchen counter. He's not letting this moment get away.

He takes the ice pack from Richie, pressing it against his cheek himself.

"Maybe it's b-because your face looks like sh-sh-shit," Bill supplies.

Richie cracks a grin. "You've got me there." When Bill doesn't smile back he continues, softer now, "You've been quiet."

Bill hesitates, lip held gently between his teeth.

"Is that really what ha-happened?" he finally says.

“Yeah,” Richie says. He chuckles lowly. “Kind of dumb, isn’t it?”

“Maybe,” Bill mutters.

Richie hisses as Bill presses the ice pack a little too harshly to his face.

“It probably won’t be makeup,” the stranger had said.

“Suh-Suh-Sorry,” whispers Bill, and he’s almost surprised to find he means it.

Bill lets out a soft sigh as he gently brushes his fingertips across the vibrant purple against Richie’s skin.

“You sh-sh-shouldn’t have duh-done that, Rich,” Bill says. “You luh-luh-look like someone tuh-tried to kill you.”

“What, you don’t think it’s sexy?” Richie grins. Bill just rolls his eyes.

“Oh yeah, suh-so sexy.”

“Yeah, that’s what I thought,” Richie says, and Bill can’t help but laugh.

For a moment the words, “I’m sorry,” linger on Bill’s lips.

But then the moment passes, and he’s back to pressing an ice pack to a stranger’s face.

-

Thursday, Stan approaches Bill at his locker.

“I was thinking about going birdwatching after school,” he says. Bill knows this, but he lets him finish anyway. “Everything’s just been…too much lately. I figured some peace and quiet could be good.”

Bill nods absentmindedly.

“Do you want to come?” Stan asks. “You’ve seemed stressed out.”

Bill's plan had been to say no. Just to feel like he has *some sort* of control over his apparently fucked up life. He knows Stan won't push, he never does.

But the word dies on Bill's tongue as soon as he makes the mistake of looking at Stan.

He doesn't look any different than usual. He's smiling softly, eyes twinkling, and curls falling in a perfect crown around his head. Bill, not for the first time, wants to reach out and pull one, just to see it bounce back into place. He doesn't.

Stan, as always, looks like a total sweetheart.

It makes Bill's heart melt just enough that he doesn't think twice before agreeing.

"Yeah," he finds himself saying. "Yeah, of course."

Stan grins and for a moment it's all worth it.

Then he walks away. With a grimace, Bill realizes he's, once again, played directly into their hands.

But it's hard to regret his actions when he's sitting next to Stan, perched precariously on a tree branch just far enough away from the ground to make him nervous. And, alright, maybe a description like that doesn't sound too appealing. But Stan has the biggest grin on his face and the binoculars in his hand are so big they make it look like he's about to tip over. It's a sight that makes Bill feel warm all over.

Stan's never been able to calm him quite like Mike has, but there's no denying that Stan can make his mood a thousand times better with just a simple smile.

" *Look* !" Stan gasps. His voice is barely a whisper but the sudden noise still nearly makes Bill topple out of the tree. Stan catches him last minute, wrapping one arm around BIll's waist and using his free hand to grasp at Bill's forearm. " *Whoa* ! You okay?"

Bill nods. "Yuh-Yeah."

Stan shoots him a smile before tentatively removing his fingers from around Bill's arm. His other arm stays secured around his waist, fingers barely brushing Bill's side.

"Look," Stan says again, pointing at the tree across from them. A small bird with a hooked beak is seated on a low branch, chirping happily. "Isn't she beautiful?"

Bill hums in agreement. "What kind of buh-buh-bird is it?"

Stan hesitates for a moment, nose scrunching up and eyebrows furrowing. For a moment Bill's brought back to the math test they studied for a few weeks back. Stan had made the same face trying to figure out a particularly hard problem.

"It's scientific name is Toxostoma redivivum-"

Bill can't help but let out a loud bark of laughter, hardly noticing when the bird - Toxins in a red a whatever the fuck - chirps indigntantly and flutters away.

" *What* ?" Stan says, his lips settling into a deep frown.

" *Tuh-Tuh-Toxin wh-what* ?"

" *Not* Toxin!" Stan insists. "Toxostoma redivivum!"

This only makes Bill laugh harder, and he has to reach out and cling to Stan in the hopes that it will stop him from falling out of the tree.

"Wh-Wh-What the fuh-fuck, Stan?" Bill cackles. "Juh-juh-just say it's *normal* nuh-name!"

Stan rolls his eyes. "I thought you'd be impressed."

"How do yuh-you even know how to suh-say that?"

"I've practiced!" Stan retorts. "I like to know the scientific names of things."

"Okay," Bill says, biting his lip to stop himself from laughing more. "Then wh-wh-what's it's un-scientific name?"

Stan hesitates again, but this time he doesn't scrunch his nose or furrowing his eyebrows. His just gnaws quietly on his fingernails and stares at the empty branch across from them.

"California Thrasher," he says finally. "That's what it's commonly known as. It's not native to Maine. It's usually found in-"

"California."

Stan lets out a short laugh. "Yeah."

"Luh-Luh-Like near Huh-Hollywood?" Bill asks, his tongue suddenly feeling too big for his mouth.

Stan nods, though he still refuses to make eye contact. "Yeah, sometimes."

"So, wh-wh-what's it doing all the wuh-way out here?"

Stan finally turns to look at him. Bill can't help but shrink back the littlest bit. He's seen Stan angry. He's seen him sad. He's seen him at what he was sure was his lowest. But he's never seen the look in his eyes at this moment.

"Maybe someone brought it here," Stan says softly.

Bill desperately wants to know more. He's getting somewhere, he can feel it. But then, as suddenly as it appeared, the look in Stan's eyes disappears.

"How are you feeling about tomorrow?" Stan asks.

Bill stares at Stan with an open jaw. He can hardly believe it. Maybe Stan really does want to help. Because he has to be asking about Richie, right?

But then he says, "Three years is a long time," and Bill's heart sinks right down to his toes.

Right. Georgie.

Fuck, he's the worst brother. It's the anniversary of Georgie's *death*

and he's too wrapped up in his own problems to remember.

"Yeah," Bill mumbles. "It - Um - It suh-sucks. I muh-muh-miss him."

"I'm sure he misses you too," Stan says. Then his eyes widen almost comically and he quickly backtracks, "You know, wherever he is now. Like - Like the afterlife. Or whatever."

"Stan…"

"Hmm?"

Bill feels like he's been sucker punched.

He misses you too.

None of this is real.

"Wh-What does th-that muh-muh-mean?"

"Nothing," murmurs Stan, eyes locked on his feet. "I just - slip of the tongue. That's all."

" *Stanley* . If - If yuh-you know suh-suh-something-"

Stan shakes his head minutely.

"I can't," he whispers. It's so soft that Bill's not sure he was supposed to hear. Then, louder, "I don't."

Bill huffs, "Fine."

He can feel Stan's eyes on him as he leaps out of the tree, legs wobbling as he lands.

"I'm guh-guh-going home," he says.

"Bill-"

"I'll see you tuh-tomorrow."

"Bill, *I'm sorry* !"

The sound of feet hitting the ground meets Bill's ears. For a second he considers running, just so he doesn't have to deal with the possibility of pathetically getting his hopes up again. But Stan's by his side again before he can blink, wringing his hands and shuffling his feet.

"I'll walk you home."

"No-"

"I didn't mean - I'm sorry."

"I know."

"I just-"

" *I know.* "

Stan blinks slowly, and Bill thinks maybe he understands. But if he does, he doesn't say anything.

"I am sorry," he whispers. "I didn't want to upset you. I wasn't thinking."

Bill sighs heavily. "It's fuh-fuh-fine, Stan. I just wuh-want to go huh-huh-home.

"Okay," Stan says, voice small, and doesn't speak the rest of the time.

-

Every year on the anniversary of Georgie's disappearance, the losers gather at Bill's house. The day is a whirlwind of emotions, but through it all, Bill always has his friends by his side.

This year is no different.

The losers walk him home from school, chatting all the while. For a few hours they try to distract him. Movies, gossip, snacks.

For awhile it works. But Bill can never keep the tears at bay for very long.

His friends never seem to mind, though, wrapping him in hugs as he babbles incoherently.

By the time they leave, he feels immensely better. At least, every previous year he's felt better.

This year he feels a little sick.

His friends were as kind as ever, but mixed with what Stan had said yesterday and the stress of this past week, it's hard to relax. Not to mention, Richie's still lounging in his bedroom long after the others have gone home.

He's laying across Bill's entire bed, glasses askew and hair mused. All in all, not very threatening. But Bill still feels his heart drop to the bottom of his feet.

"How are you feeling?" Richie asks.

Bill shrugs noncommittally.

Richie frowns and reaches out for him. "C'mere." Bill must hesitate for too long because a moment later Richie's chuckling and saying, "I won't bite. C'mon."

His feet suddenly feel full of led. Each step takes more energy than Bill's had to use all week, but he's still standing at the foot of the bed much sooner than he would've liked.

"Luh-Luh-Look, Rich-" Bill cuts himself off with a yelp as Richie wraps his arms around his waist and tugs him onto the bed.

"Cuddle with me," Richie pouts.

" *Nuh-Nuh-No* !"

Richie releases him, scrambling backwards to fix him with a concerned stare. "No? What's wrong? Are you okay?"

"I - I'm - Ruh-Ruh-Ruh-Rich-"

Richie nods furiously.

“Yeah?” he says, reaching out to lace their fingers together. “What is it?”

“I - I duh-duh-don’t wuh-wuh-wuh - *Fuck* ! I cuh-cuh-can’t-”

“That’s okay,” Richie quickly says. “That’s okay. Just take your time, yeah?”

Bill sniffles. “Yuh-Yeah. I juh-juh-just - I just wuh-wanna go to suh-suh-sleep.”

“Okay,” murmurs Richie. “That’s okay. We can do that.”

He flops down on the bed, staring up at Bill expectantly.

“C’mon,” he says softly. “I promise I won’t grab you again.”

Bill tentatively lays down next to him. He’s so close to Richie he can count every freckle on his face, but he still refuses to reach out and touch him. Richie seems to understand, holding his arms tightly against his chest.

“I’m sorry,” he murmurs.

“Yuh-You should go,” Bill says, because his brain is short circuiting and making it impossible to think of a more polite way to say this. Richie’s face crumples and for a moment Bill has the most overwhelming urge to reach out and hold him. But one moment of sadness doesn’t fix the lie that is Bill’s entire life, so he continues, “I juh-just wanna be alone ruh-right now.”

“Yeah, alright,” Richie says, scrambling out of the bed. “Um - Call if you need anything, okay? I love you.”

Bill smiles, awkward and not at all sincere. “Yeah. Love you too.”

Richie closes the door behind him and Bill’s alone again. Or, as alone as he can be.

He was sure sleep would be easier without Richie, without the fear that he would pounce at any moment. But Bill lays awake for hours, staring at the ceiling. A million thoughts are running through his

brain.

Richie is the biggest asshole he's ever known. The last thing he said to him was a bold-faced lie. And yet, he had left without a fight.

Bill has been worried sick about tonight all week, and all he had to say was *no* .

"Director's orders," the stranger had said. *"Can't say no. Can't risk getting kicked off the show."*

But Richie had said no.

He had gone against this mysterious director's orders.

Okay, Richie is an asshole. But maybe he's not the *biggest* asshole.

He has some redeeming qualities, enough that Bill can't risk him getting kicked off the show. He can't be the guy whose exes all magically disappear.

So, with a heavy sigh, he forces himself out of bed and pulls on the first pair of shoes he can find. Maybe a romantic apology and night of cuddling will be enough for him to stay.

Richie's house is completely dark, no surprise. What is a surprise is when Bill peers inside Richie's bedroom window and finds his room, while messy and well lived in, completely empty.

Notes for the Chapter:

> Yooo this chapter's longer than the others, I'm very happy about that. I think I'm going to try to keep them around this length from now on but they might vary a little bit. Also I keep changing my mind about whether or not I like this chapter, but I wanted to get it up fast so I'm posting it before I can back out.
>
> Anyway please leave comments and kudos and all that good stuff, they fill my soul with warmth. I appreciate you all for reading and hopefully chapter 4 will be up soon!

4. Chapter Four

Summary for the Chapter:

> Despite Bill's efforts, Stan's words are harsh. "Look, I don't know what you think happened, but whatever it is, it's wrong. Okay? I just - I just fucking - I dunno - I fell, okay? I fell on my face on the way over here because - because I wanted to talk to Richie. That's all there is to it, alright? There's nothing-"
>
> "I don't th-th-think anything," Bill insists. "I know what's going on."
>
> Stan whips around fast as lightning, pointing an accusatory finger in Bill's face. "You don't know shit."

The reason Bill finds Richie's house empty, is because Richie does not live there. Still a few months short of eighteen, he has to live with some sort of parental guardian, and while Robert Gray has tried many times to convince Richie's mother to live on set, she has refused.

"He needs time outside of that horrendous set," she said on multiple occasions. *"He's already there all day."*

So, Richie, thankfully, is allowed to come home and have dinner with his actual family once a day. Even if that dinner is normally closer to a midnight snack.

But he's all too overly aware of the days counting down until his eighteenth. As soon as that clock strikes midnight he'll be dragging his suitcase into that god awful stage home and not leaving for who knows how long. Of course, he could refuse. But then it would be goodbye Bill and hello Hollywood blacklist. Which is absolutely *not* where he wants to be.

But this week has been stressful enough without worrying about that.

So Richie shoves that thought to the back of his mind and focuses instead on getting Eddie's bedroom window open.

"It got fucking stuck again," he grumbles when he finally finds himself inside.

"Sorry," Eddie says, voice heavy with sleep. "Maybe you should've pushed harder?"

"Or maybe you just could have not fallen asleep?" Richie bites back.

"It's not my fault you got here at fucking one in the morning!"

"You're lucky I'm here at all," Richie insists. "Robert wanted me to stay the night."

" *I know* ."

Richie's face drops. Suddenly his scuffed up shoes are the most fascinating thing in the world, his entire head dropping to better stare at them.

"Right," he mumbles. "Sorry."

Eddie peers at him under his massive pile of blankets. Almost his entire face is covered, only his eyes and *cute, cute, cute* fluffy hair peeking out. Richie is surprised he isn't suffocating under there.

"You didn't do it," Eddie finally says.

Richie shakes his head, still refusing to look up. "He was still upset. I didn't want - I couldn't do it."

Finally he lifts his head. His eyes lock with Eddie's, and his heart stutters to a stop in his chest. How does he explain what happened? He's almost positive Eddie was watching the entire thing on TV, but he wasn't there. He didn't see the terror in Bill's eyes.

"Something's wrong, Eds," Richie says, voice strangled. "It was like - It was like he was *scared* of - of me."

Eddie silently opens the blankets and Richie dives inside without a

second thought. He wants desperately to move closer. He knows if he did, if he were to wrap his arms around Eddie and pull him closer, Eddie would accept him without any hesitance. But the guilt is still eating Richie from the inside out. So he keeps his hands to himself.

“Robert’s gonna be pissed,” Eddie says.

“I can take him down,” Richie says with a halfhearted grin. “Have you seen these guns? I’m basically shredded.”

“ *Shut up* , Richie,” Eddie huffs, his lips twisting into a frown. “That’s not funny. He’s already pissed at Stan-”

“At Stan?”

“ *Yes* , keep up! Stan texted the group chat and said Robert was mad, and to try not to piss him off any more.” Eddie snatches his phone off the nightstand and shoves it into Richie’s face. Just to further prove his point. “And what did you do? What did you fucking do? You pissed him off more!”

“Maybe he won’t be mad,” Richie answers weakly. “He has to know the response wouldn’t have been exactly good if I-”

“You think he cares?” Eddie sneers. “Any attention is good attention. You would get the blame, not him.”

Richie winces. He knows Eddie’s right, but it’s not something he wants to dwell on.

“What’s he mad at Stan about?” Richie asks instead.

“Maybe you would know if you looked at the group chat-”

“It’s supposed to be 19-fucking-92 on set, I can’t bring my fucking cell phone in there-”

“You suck.”

A grin cracks across Richie’s face. “Yeah, I know. You never waste an opportunity to tell me.”

“Mhm,” Eddie hums. “Because it’s true.”

“I know he’s gonna be mad,” Richie whispers. “I know I fucked up real bad.” Richie feels his insides twist as the words leave his mouth. He actually would like to think that, for once, he did the right thing. But Robert won’t see it that way. “But I just - I don’t want to think about it. I can deal with it in the morning.”

Eddie hesitates. If Richie knows him - and he does - then he’s spent the last three hours perfecting exactly what he wants to say - or, more accurately, scream - at Richie. He might as well have a 50 slide powerpoint presentation informing Richie just how badly he’s fucked up.

But then Eddie nods, and the conversation drops.

“What’s happening out here?” Richie asks.

He doesn’t mind his job. Other than the ongoing terror of Robert’s wrath and the shame of constant lying, it’s not half bad. He’s an actor on the number one television show in America, he has thousands of adoring fans, and he’s made friends he wouldn’t trade for the world. Still, spending all day on set is exhausting. And with the cell phone ban, he has little to no knowledge of what’s happening on the outside world until he gets home.

“Not much,” Eddie says. “I stayed here for most of the day. Mom was working on next week’s script and wanted my help. Not that she actually liked any of my ideas.”

Richie rolls his eyes. “Alright, I’ll prepare myself for a fucking soap opera.”

“Yeah, it’ll suck,” Eddie says. “But, on a brighter note, Bev’s gaining some traction. She has an interview set up on some talk show! It’s one of the smaller ones, but it’s still something!”

“That’s great, Eds,” Richie grins. And it is. Bev’s working hard and Richie’s proud of her, she might actually achieve something. But the thought still scares him. What would happen afterwards?

“She wants us all to come over that night,” Eddie says. “Do you think

you can make it?"

It would be tough. If anyone saw them together, it would be all over the internet. It would be the scandal of the decade. Or of the week, Richie supposes. There are so many scandals nowadays. But, no matter how big the scandal, it could destroy his career and everything Bev's worked for.

Still, he nods. "I think so."

The grin Eddie gives him makes it all worth it. "Great! She's gonna be really happy, Rich. She misses you."

"I miss her too," Richie says. "Not as much as Ben misses her, of course. I think he's starting to go crazy."

Eddie laughs mirthlessly. "I think I know he feels."

And, *ouch* , that makes Richie feel like shit. He's sure Eddie doesn't mean it to, in fact he *knows* he doesn't mean it to, but that doesn't stop the guilt from pooling in his stomach.

"I'm sorry," he whispers. "But you know I can't - we can't do anything. Not while I'm with Bill."

"I know," Eddie shrugs. "It's not your fault."

And Richie knows, but he doesn't think he *knows* .

Because, in reality, it all feels like his fault.

"I'm gonna go to sleep," he says. It's simpler than what he really wants to say. "Need to be well rested if Robert's gonna kick my ass tomorrow."

Eddie pulls a face. "Rich-"

"Goodnight, Eds."

For a moment, Richie thinks Eddie's going to ignore him. He's almost positive Eddie will insist they stay up for just a few more minutes. Probably to talk about Richie's horribly inappropriate humor. Maybe

to talk about how sleeping in the same bed is slowly becoming a constant. But probably not.

But then Eddie's shoulders deflate.

"Goodnight," he says.

And that's that.

Richie falls asleep almost immediately, which he's thankful for. But it's only been just under an hour when an incessant buzzing wakes him back up. Which he's less thankful for.

He fumbles around the bedside dresser until his hand wraps around the phone. He answers without checking the caller ID. Not that it would matter if he tried. Who knows where his glasses have gone.

"Richard, where the fuck have you been," growls a voice, and suddenly Richie's wide awake.

"I - Um - Sorry," he splutters, shooting upright. "Is this about tonight? Because I know you're mad but-"

"Have you not seen *any* of the messages we've been sending you?"

The sudden lack of interest in Richie's fuck up maybe should have put Richie at least a little bit at ease. But, shockingly, it only worsens the anxiety growing in the pit of his stomach. What could possibly make Robert so mad he would forget?

"Well," Richie starts, then stops. Why should he bother? "No," he says, rather lamely.

"There's an emergency on set," Robert snaps. "You should have been here nearly forty minutes ago."

"Forty minutes?" Richie repeats stupidly.

"Yes," Robert continues, seething. "You're lucky Stan was around. Who knows what would have happened if someone wasn't there to cover your fucking ass."

Somewhere between all of this, Eddie wakes up.

He's staring up at Richie now, still burrowed under the mound of blankets, with blurry eyes and sleep-mussed hair.

"Don't go," he whispers, nearly pleading. If he were fully awake, Richie's sure he wouldn't have said anything. But Eddie's always been a little clingy when he's tired.

Richie silently brings a finger to his lips. If Robert finds out he's here, he's dead meat.

"I'm on my way," Richie promises, and tries to ignore the almost child-like way Eddie pouts. He stumbles around the room, nearly toppling to the ground as he tries to put on his shoes. "I'm on my way. I'll be there in thirty minutes-"

"It should only take you fifteen," Robert says, voice slow and thick with suspicion. "If you're at your house."

"I am! Of course I am!" Richie insists. "Where else would I be? I just - I just have to - um - shower, ya know?"

"Do *not* waste time, Richie!" Robert snarls. "Fifteen minutes!"
"Okay, okay! Fifteen!"

Richie hangs up with a click.

"You can't make it in fifteen," Eddie says.

"I know. But I have to try, Robert would kill me-"

"He'll kill you for hanging up on him."

"I know! He'll kill me for lots of things. I just - I gotta go, okay?"

"Whatever," grumbles Eddie. He shoves his face in the pillow, muffling the words until they're barely intelligible. "Doesn't matter. Should stay here. But *no* , gotta listening to fucking Robert."

"I'm sorry, Eds," Richie says. "I'll see you at Bev's, okay?"

Eddie grumbles out a response, face still buried in his pillow, but Richie doesn't have time to stick around and figure out what he said. He just hurriedly ruffles his hair, earning him another indignant squawk, and runs to throw himself out the window.

-

Bill, meanwhile, has managed to climb through what he always assumed was Richie's childhood bedroom window. Now he's not so sure.

The bed is rumpled, as if it's been slept in, and clothes and various school supplies litter the floor, but the room is void of one crucial aspect: Richie. In fact, the entire house is empty of any living being.

The whole experience is chilling, walking through Richie's house alone in the dead of night.

But then someone knocks at the front door. And that's almost worse.

Bill stares at the looming door for a moment, weighing the possibilities of just how likely it is that he'll get murdered. He finally decides that, no, he won't get murdered. They wouldn't want to kill off their lead, right? Then what use would he be?

It gives him the courage to cross the room and hesitantly grab the door knob, but not before grabbing the first sharp object he can find. He shoves the scissors in his back pocket and swings the door open.

"Bill?"

"Stan?"

It near impossible to see any details in the night, but the voice is undeniably Stan's. He still has his hand raised, like he's ready to knock again.

"Is Richie here?" he asks.

"Richie was puh-puh-planning on stuh-stuh-staying at my house," Bill says, like it's obvious.

“And so you decided to go to Richie’s house?”

“Wuh-Well he didn’t actually stay.”

“So then why did you tell me?”

“Wuh-Why would you go to Ruh-Ruh-Richie’s house if you knew he was at my house?”

“I didn’t know he would be at your house!”

“So why are you here?”

“To see...Richie…” Stan says, trailing off lamely.

He shuffles nervously and Bill has to fight to keep the grin off his face. He’s finally backed him into a corner he can’t get out of.

“In the muh-middle of the night?” Bill says, quirking an eyebrow.

“Maybe there was an emergency!” Stan blurts.

“Was there?”

Stan shrugs. “I dunno. Maybe.”

Bill hums softly. “Then why don’t yuh-yuh-you come in. Tell me about this puh-possible emergency.”

“ *Wait, no* !”

But Stan’s pleas are a second too late. Bill finds the light switch and a moment later the living room is flooded in a warm, golden light, spilling easily out onto the front porch. Stan squints as the light washes over him, suddenly giving Bill the chance to see every one of his features with ease. Including the purpling bruise spreading over his cheekbone.

“Juh-Juh-Jesus,” Bill gasps out, reaching out to skim his fingers over the bruise. “What happened?”

“Nothing, it’s not important,” Stan says, flinching out of Bill’s touch. “Look, we shouldn’t be here without them home-”

“Stan, what the fuh-fuck.”

“C’mon, we should go.”

“Stan, talk to me!”

Stan takes a deep, shuddering breath. “I can’t - No. No. I don’t want to. Please, Bill, I don’t want to talk about it.”

“You duh-don’t want to or you can’t?”

“What’s the difference?” Stan squeaks out.

He’s bouncing on the balls of his feet, something that only happens when something’s really thrown him off. Stan’s usually so grounded. Despite this, he’s still stiff as a board. His arms hang straight as poles by his sides, and his hands are clenched in almost painful looking fists.

Bill slowly reaches out, taking Stan’s hands in his own. He uncurls the fists gently, hissing as he notices the half-moon indents Stan’s fingernails have made on the soft flesh of his palm.

He needs a new plan of action.

“Okay, wuh-we don’t need to tuh-tuh-talk about it,” Bill promises, voice soft. “Why don’t we juh-just get you cleaned up, yeah?”

Stan nods, allowing himself to be pulled into the house. Bill can feel the muscles tense under his hands when Stan notices what direction they’re headed in, but, still, he doesn’t say a word.

Even once he manages to get Stan in the bathroom with the door shut firmly behind him, the only sound that can be heard is the running faucet. Stan’s washing his hands furiously, though they look clean as ever.

Bill approaches him cautiously.

For a second he’s reminded of the California Thrasher. It had flown away the moment Bill had gotten noisy. It hadn’t mattered then, it was hardly the most important thing on his mind, but he can’t let it

happen again.

So when he speaks, he's sure to keep his voice as soft as he possibly can. "Stuh-Stuh-Stan-"

Despite Bill's efforts, Stan's words are harsh. "Look, I don't know what you think happened, but whatever it is, it's wrong. Okay? I just - I just fucking - I dunno - I fell, okay? I fell on my face on the way over here because - because I wanted to talk to Richie. That's all there is to it, alright? There's nothing-"

"I don't th-th-think anything," Bill insists. "I know what's going on."

Stan whips around fast as lightning, pointing an accusatory finger in Bill's face. "You don't know shit."

Bill's face darkens. Fuck it. Stan's not some bird that needs to be coddled. He's just an actor and he *will* give Bill answers.

"I know none of this is real," Bill spits, moving in to crowd Stan against the sink. "I know none of *you* are real. I know you're all just following a script. You all knew Bowers was gonna jump me on Monday and you just let it happen! And you knew Richie was gonna try and sleep with me! On the anniversary of Georgie's death, no less. Except he's not dead, is he? You said so yourself! But for fucking *years* you let me think he was gone! Were you just gonna let me live my whole life like that? Just trapped in this fucking - this fucking - God, what *the fuck* is this place?"

Stan's shaking by the time Bill finishes. And when Stan finally speaks, it's through a veil of tears so thick his words are barely intelligible. "Please don't hurt me."

For a second Bill's confused. He can't be that threatening, can he?

It's only then that he realizes the scissors have somehow moved from his back pocket and are now being clutched in a white-knuckle grip in his right hand. He lets his grasp go slack, but doesn't release the scissors completely.

"I - I'm - suh-suh - I'm suh-suh-suh-"

“I’m sorry.”

Bill nods, because, *yes* , that’s exactly what he wants to say. But when he looks up it’s evident that Stan wasn’t supplying the words for Bill. He’s clutching the edge of the sink with one hand, as if he’s afraid he will collapse if he lets go, and with his free hand he’s attempting to shield the rest of his body.

“I’m sorry,” he repeats, voice shaky. “I didn’t mean - I didn’t mean to hurt you. I wanted to help. *We* wanted to help. But - But - But it’s not that easy. Robert, he’s *scary* .”

“Who’s Ruh-Ruh-Robert?” Bill asks. “Is he the director?”

Stan nods.

Bill has to admit, he was expecting a more threatening name than Robert.

“Robert Gray,” Stan continues. “He’s one of the most powerful directors in Hollywood. He - um - He’s directed lots of stuff. You know that movie - the one with the clown? With the clown and he has the - the fucking balloons? Ya know?”

“ *No* !” Bill waves the scissors through the air to emphasize his point, and Stan shrieks. “Suh-Sorry! Sorry!”

Stan attempts to scramble away from him, but he has nowhere to go, and instead slams his head against the mirror. His chest is heaving and he watches the scissors between Bill’s fingers with eyes the size of saucers.

“I’m not guh-guh-gonna hurt you,” Bill whispers. “I - uh - look.” He chucks the scissors across the bathroom, hearing them land with a clatter in the bathtub. “Suh-Suh-See?”

Stan watches him warily, sniffling slightly.

“Huh-Hey,” Bill murmurs. He cups Stan’s face between his hand and gently wipes the remaining tears away with the pads of his thumbs. “I wuh-won’t hurt you. Promise.” Stan nods, though a few tears still drip from the corners of his eyes. “Robert,” Bill says once Stan’s

breathing has evened again. “Whu-Why is he scary?”

Stan takes a deep breath.

Holds it.

For two. Three. Four.

Then all at once he lets it out, and in a rush points to the bruise blossoming across his face.

Oh.

Notes for the Chapter:

> Yooo we've got Richie's pov!! And the plot is finally starting to move forward! This might be my favorite chapter so far, simply for that reason.
>
> Sorry it took me so long to update, life has been very hectic recently. But also I think this chapter is the longest one yet! So hopefully that makes up for it a little bit. The next update might not be too quick either, but I promise I'll get it posted as soon as I can!
>
> Thank you all so much for reading! Please leave comments and kudos and all that, I love hearing about your reactions!

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